

The Psychoanalytic Reading on Sexual Obsession in Nabokov's *Lolita*

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Abstract

This study aims to examine sexual repression and obsession in Vladimir Nabokov's novel "Lolita" (1955) by Vladimir Nabokov, focusing on how psychological mechanisms shape the novel's central conflict, as well as Humbert's behavior, which views repression and obsession as normal personality traits. This study analyzes the underlying forces of repression and obsession and influence the way Humbert interprets reality, makes decisions, and interacts with others. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method, focusing on the analysis of non-numerical data in the form of narrative text with the aim of generating interpretive insights. The analysis utilizes Freud's psychoanalytic framework, which is based on the concepts of the Id, Ego, and Superego, as well as repression and defense mechanisms. The findings of this study highlight three points. First the concept of "nymphet," which functions as a fantasy object from past trauma the death of Annabel Leigh. Second, pedophilic desire that continuously sustained by the Id's impulses unresolved and repeatedly overpowering his rationality and morality. Third, the unresolved conflict between unconscious desires Humbert creates and existing social norms in public. Therefore, psychological process demonstrates how obsession distorts Humbert's perception of reality, enabling him to continuously justify his actions and engage in behavior that violates moral standards. This study concludes that the Freudian psychoanalytic framework is an effective way to interpret "Lolita"; thus, this study argues that obsession and repression are the underlying forces that create conflict in the novel. obsession become important in literary studies because help explain Humbert's behave.

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INTRODUCTION

Obsession occupies a central place in literary analysis because it offers a window into the deeper psychological conflicts that drive a character's actions throughout a narrative. Critics turn to obsession again and again because it offers a way

into the psychological undercurrents that push a character toward one choice over another. Once this fixation takes hold, moral considerations and social expectations are often pushed aside in favor of satisfying personal desire, producing tension between individual impulse and the norms society has established around relationships, behavior, and

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power (Lantos, 2019). Zaidel (2016) explain how obsession shapes a person's suggestion, behaviors, and decision, because the actions consequently center on the attempt to realize specific desires or fantasies. In literature, these elements drive the plot and create tension, conflict, and unexpected developments that keep the reader captivated throughout the story (U.N. & B.A., 2025).

Obsession serves as a compelling instrument for a writer, as it almost automatically articulates what happens when desire is allowed to surge unchecked and traces the resulting devastation extending from the central figure to the innocent individuals affected by its consequences *Lolita* presents a clear example of this pattern, as primary motivation behind his actions. His inability to control this urge drives him to engage in ethically questionable, manipulation behavior, which eventually drives the conflict and the novel's entire plot.

Nabokov & Boyd (1996) by Vladimir has been analyzed from various perspectives. De Beistegui (2021) examines the novel through the lens of Lacanian psychological concepts—the unconscious and desire—which play a significant role in the novel's characters (Fatima Mosi, n.d.) shows that her research employs psychological criticism to analyze Humbert's pedophilic tendencies and links them to unresolved trauma resulting from the loss of Annabel, by focusing on the the sexuality of young girls as well as the novel's influence on public perceptions of child sexual abuse—this study examines how repression and obsession function as elements linked to Humbert's behavior, which is shaped by his psychological tensions as a conflict within the narrative. Freud's psychoanalytic theory provides a framework for understanding Humbert's psychological conflict through the interaction between the id, ego, and superego: the id represents instinctual drives, the ego mediates conflicting forces, and the superego represents moral boundaries Liu Li (2007) AZIZALIYEVA (2020) argues that Humbert's unconscious desires stem from a repressive childhood marked by a lack of affection, which shaped his understanding of attachment and desire in adulthood. In the novel, Humbert's polite and cultured demeanor reflects a psychological defense mechanism in which the ego

attempts to regulate the demands of the id while conforming to social norms Umami & Dewi (2021)

The purpose of this study is to analyze how obsession and repression influence Humbert's sexual behavior in Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*. This study aims to understand how Humbert's efforts to maintain and defend his obsession with *Lolita* highlight deeper psychological aspects. Therefore, the following research questions are discussed in this study:

- How do obsession and motivate Humbert's actions that highlight sexual behavior in relation to the conflict in the narrative?
- What types of obsessive thoughts and fantasies influence Humbert Humbert's sexual actions throughout the novel?
- How does obsession contribute to the development of manipulation, control, and sexual behavior in the relationship between Humbert and *Lolita*?

Nabokov & Boyd (1996) Vladimir Nabokov recounts the life of Humbert Humbert, a European intellectual who narrates his experiences while awaiting trial in the United States. The story shows the psychological concepts of obsession and repression. Humbert describes his early love for Annabel Leigh, whose unexpected death causes a profound emotional trauma that hasn't been healed. According (TRZECIAK, 2009) Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, *Humbert's unconscious mind is still influenced by this encounter, which can be seen as a suppressed desire*. Humbert becomes fixated on young females, whom he refers to as "nymphets," as a result of his emotional development being disrupted. Later on, this obsession manifests itself in his compulsive devotion to Dolores Haze, often known as *Lolita*. In the narrative shows that repression and obsession influence acts of sexual abuse, the object of fantasy, and acts of paedophilia directed within Humbert's character

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method, utilizing non-numerical data to interpret the meanings contained within the novel's text. (Creswell, 2017) explains that qualitative research is an approach that explores how social and human experiences can be understood by individuals or

groups through in-depth, contextual, and imperative analysis. This method is highly recommended for literary studies, where psychological and thematic dimensions are difficult to measure numerically.

The primary data in this study comes from the novel *Lolita* (1995) by Vladimir Nabokov; the main object of analysis in this novel is Humbert. Secondary data consists of Freud's psychoanalytic concepts regarding obsession and repression, as well as other supporting materials such as academic journals, books, and previous publications. These sources provide a strong theoretical foundation and support the psychological interpretations developed throughout the study. Data collection was conducted in stages to ensure accurate results.

The data collection is accomplished through several steps to ensure that the data was analyzed accurately, which is reliable for the analysis. The researcher starts by reading *Lolita* closely to get a complete sense of the narrative and to look for problems of repression and obsession. Secondly, the evidence in the form of words, phrases, sentences and dialogues were interpreted using content analysis techniques. This technique is suitable for qualitative research because it allows researchers to explore deeper meanings, contexts, and social dynamics beyond surface-level data Lamichhane & Lamichhane (2024). Those data represented through psychological concepts which are meticulously chosen, emphasized and progressively categorized according to their importance in relation to the investigation. Furthermore, this study utilizes Freud's psychoanalytic theory as the analytical lens, notably focusing on notions of repression and obsession. This perspective is employed to interpret the chosen data and investigate how these psychological mechanisms are revealed through the character's narrative, thoughts, and actions. Lastly, the results are shown to expose how repressions and obsessions play into the portrayals within the novel.

According to (Kadir, 2024) the Freudian psychoanalytic model is applied to interpret unconscious motivations and structural psychological tension. The id, ego, and superego. Freud's id-ego-superego framework explains Humbert's psychological conflict by revealing how his id triggers an obsessive desire for Lolita, while his ego attempts to balance those impulses within

the bounds of social norms. At the same time, Humbert's superego functions as a moral force that increasingly challenges and regulates his behavior that contributing to a gradual shift in his self-perception. However, this development does not entirely resolve his internal conflict, as the ongoing interplay between the id, ego, and superego continues to generate psychological instability and moral ambiguity throughout the novel (W. Meng, 2023) The findings of this study focus on how obsession and repression shape Humbert's conduction *Lolita*, particularly in relation to this sexual behavior and the psychological conflict central to the narrative.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nymphet Obsession of the Fantasy, Pathology, and Abuse in *Lolita*

Humbert's obsession with Lolita manifests in three interrelated dimensions: as a psychological fantasy object, as a driver of pedophilic desire, and as a method of ongoing sexual abuse. These three dimensions are not three separate events, but rather a single, continuous narrative.

The Nymphet as Object of Fantasy: Repression and Psychological Conflict

Humbert explains that his desire is not directed toward a real child, but rather through a fantasy he has created and projected onto Lolita (Dinar & Heriyati, 2021). This "nymph" is constructed both explicitly and imaginatively, as evidenced by his confession in the novel "Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as 'nymphets' (Nabokov, 1955, p. 10) that line explains that the "nymph" was created by Humbert's own classification, not her actual identity.

This fantasy is inseparable from repression, because the origin of Humbert's obsession, as described by Nabokov (1955), stems from the death of Annabel Leigh. This loss, which was suppressed and never processed, unconsciously carried over to subsequent girls; Humbert admits that "*the shock of Annabel's death consolidated the*

frustration of that nightmare summer, made of it a permanent obstacle to any further romance throughout the cold years of my youth" (Nabokov, 1955, p. 9). Freud (1915) explains that his painful experience was not resolved but was repressed into his unconscious, where it would always remain and take on a deviant form "*madly, clumsily, shamelessly, agonizingly*" (Nabokov, 1955, pp. 7–8). This explains that the sense of loss never truly disappears but transforms into an obsessive desire for Lolita, where Lolita serves as a substitute for Annabel Leigh, and not as Lolita herself.

This repressed situation that triggers ongoing psychological conflict. Humbert is fully aware of social and moral prohibitions, yet he is unable to act in accordance with that awareness. He also describes himself as "*consumed by a hell furnace of localized lust for every passing nymphet whom, as a law-abiding poltroon I never dared approach*" (Nabokov, 1955, pp. 11–12) this conflict is structural rather than incidental. He perceives his desires as belonging to a realm separate from the normal fantasies of ordinary people; he is fully aware that "*not one but two sexes, neither of which was mine... they were as different as mist and mast*" (Nabokov, 1955, p. 10). This situation illustrates what (W. Meng, 2023) describes as the central tension of the novel—namely, fantasies that, on an unconscious level, cannot reconcile with moral reality Umami & Dewi (2021). They also argue that the desire, which is constantly rationalized, and his efforts to maintain his public image in order to be socially accepted—even while engaging in actions driven by forbidden impulses—serve as the ego's function in mediating his forbidden reflexive impulses and social boundaries.

The Nymphet as Object of Pedophilic Desire

The "nymphs" in this novel are not merely Humbert's personal fantasies. Rather, the children are the true subjects of interpretation through Humbert's psychological lens, as if they were the ones inviting or embodying his desires. This desire is a responsibility shifted onto the children through a definition that asserts that these young girls "*reveal their true nature*" to "*bewitched travelers*" (Nabokov, 1955, p. 10) in this context, it is interpreted as if these girls possess a demonic nature that compels them. The mechanism described by (Freud, 1989)—the id—is an

automatic response, unmediated by morality, to pleasurable stimuli; this is presented within a self-serving framework through Humbert's narrative: instinct is treated as fate.

Humbert's perception is saturated with repetitive interpretations, so that even harmless moments become imbued with sexual meaning. His perception is typically dominated by fantasies that are clearly evident in his descriptions as he observes Lolita reading in the park: "*I dissolved in the sun, with my book for fig leaf, as her auburn ringlets fell all over her skinned knee*" (Nabokov, 1955, pp. 12–13). (Liu Ting, 2022) explains his interpretation that Nabokov's unresolved grief over Annabel is projected onto Lolita, where control over possession is sought to maintain the image in his own mind. This projected impulse represents a psychological regression, an inevitable failure, and also the narrative of the novel.

At first, it was merely a fantasy that occasionally turned into an uncontrollable impulse. "*The hell furnace of localized lust*" (Nabokov, 1955, pp. 11–12) This line explains that it is not merely unconsciousness, but a persistent psychological state that endures throughout the novel. The transformation of this impulse into an obsession aligns with Freud's concept of the unconscious, where rational control gradually dissipates due to uncontrollable desires and persistent psychological disturbances, which in turn give rise to primary thought processes. (Phillips, 2013) explains that there is no tangible connection between time and the conflicts that are tolerated without resolution. Therefore, pedophilic desires cannot be considered a deviation but are rather rooted in an abnormal condition.

The Nymphet as Mechanism of Sexual Abuse

Humbert's psychological journey from fantasy to the pinnacle of his desire—abuse—is openly admitted by him at the end of the story "*I loved you. I was a pentapod monster, but I loved you... And there were times when I knew how you felt, and it was hell to know it, my little one. Lolita girl, brave Dolly Schiller*" (Nabokov, 1955, p. 278). The discussion in this section does not refer to a declaration of love, but rather to the meaning of "monster" in the broader context of this novel. The desire depicted in this novel is conveyed through more subtle expressions, a more poetic style of language, and

theories of self-justification. At this point, his defenses are temporarily shattered.

Freudian theory explains this collapse as a breach of the superego into the conscience and self-evaluation (Freud, 1989) within the repressed psyche of the narrative. This event is discussed by (Kruse & Skilbrei, 2024) as a rationalization that is ultimately defeated by the superego—the destruction of Lolita's life by Humbert, marked by a forced confession, albeit incomplete and belated. This confession emerges as a fact only after the abuse and Lolita's irreparably damaged childhood, highlighting the irony emphasized in the novel: Humbert, as the narrator, realizes his past too late to prevent it from happening, and serves more to secure the reader's sympathy than to take moral responsibility.

At the same time, these three elements—fantasy, obsession, and pedophilia—along with the acts of sexual abuse, illustrate a complete psychological trajectory. The “nymphette” complex begins as a diversion from repressed grief, transforms into an uncontrollable, self-justifying desire, and ultimately manifests as harmful behavior that can only be scrutinized by a belatedly formed superego. The tragedy of this novel lies in how convincingly the stages of the narrative are presented as if they were inevitable.

Ego formation to Nymphet of negotiating desire and self control to nymphet

Humbert's fixation on the nymphet, in *Lolita* (1955), does more than drive the plot; it builds his ego, and it does so along three connected lines. The nymphet starts out as a fantasy that organizes how he sees the world. From there it becomes the center of his pedophilic desire. And by the end, it has turned into the justification he leans on to keep his abusive behavior going. These are not three separate phases so much as one continuous pull, his ego forming itself again and again around the same idealized image.

First, in *Lolita*, ego formation cannot be separated from the need to keep the nymphet alive as an object of desire. Nabokov (1955) does not portray Humbert as someone who simply acts on his impulses. He portrays Humbert as someone who manages them, constantly, redirecting and containing what cannot be openly expressed. When the obsession runs into social prohibition,

Humbert does not let it go. Instead of abandoning his obsession, Humbert seeks an institutional solution, evident in his decision to marry: *"I decided to marry. It occurred to me that regular hours, home-cooked meals, all the conventions of marriage, the prophylactic routine of its bedroom activities and, who knows, the eventual flowering of certain moral values, of certain spiritual substitutes, might help me, if not to purge myself of my degrading and dangerous desires, at least to keep them under pacific control"* (Nabokov, 1955, p. 16).

Guided by the reality principle, the ego's role here is to serve as a mediator between natural urges and external constraints Freud (1989). Humbert's decision to marry is evidence that his desire has not disappeared, but has become more controlled within a social context. Humbert's crude actions, as depicted by Nabokov (1955), are not those of a caged savage, but rather something structurally embedded within the psychic apparatus that perpetuates the “nymphomaniac” fantasy—a fixation that conflicts with external reality and remains unresolved; rather, the constant anxiety stems from the fear of losing the object of his desire—a fear that Humbert reframes through his refined vocabulary as a coping mechanism Emery (2019). This obsession is reinterpreted using more beautiful and subtle language, making it appear not as a deviation but as something justifiable (Zuraikat, 2023), whereby the fantasy world Humbert constructs makes his desire seem integrated into everyday life—even though it ultimately collapses. (McGinn, 1999) notes that moral reality has a way of pressing through even the most carefully built defenses, and when it does, what breaks through alongside it is guilt, pulling Humbert toward a punishment he ends up directing at himself.

Second, The ego in *Lolita* (1955) acts as a mediator that compromises consequences before doing the act. Humbert's composure is no accident. It is his ego fulfilling its function, controlling his behavior even as his obsession with “nymphlets” secretly dominates his inner world Phelan (2007). He does not give in to his anger; he does not act impulsively in ways that might expose his secret. Instead, his ego acts as a balancing force: it masks those desires behind politeness, social manners, and all the superficial behaviors that make him appear to be someone with nothing to hide. The mask holds. At least for the time being, this mediating role becomes

evident when Humbert's own confession that "Humbert the Terrible deliberated with Humbert the Small whether Humbert Humbert should kill her or her lover, or both, or neither". (Nabokov 1955 pp.18–19). (Freud, 1989) describes exactly this kind of pause: the reality principle, the ego's way of running an impulse against its likely consequences before deciding whether to let it through. Humbert's response, then, is never just a reaction.

CONCLUSION

Using Freud's psychoanalytic framework, this study aims to demonstrate that Humbert's sexual obsession in "Lolita" stems from repressed psychological experiences, which gradually transformed into a fantasy known as "nymph"—a subjective construct used to justify his desires, rather than an objective fixation on young girls. His fantasy is not merely abstract; rather, it hardens into a pedophilic obsession that serves to control Humbert's perceptions, decisions, and relationships in the novel. The core of the problem in this novel lies in the ego, which operates not as a moral force but as a means to regulate and maintain the obsession through compromise, rationalization, and self-control. Guided by the reality principle, the ego manages the unresolved tension between unconscious desires and social reality, functioning as a never-ending process of regulation. The novel's portrayal of this mechanism ultimately reveals a damage that can never be repaired. Humbert's obsession, which turns into an unchecked desire, leads to violent behavior that traumatizes Dolores Haze, even though his superego compels him to possess a sufficient level of moral awareness to recognize himself as a "monster." This recognition comes only after the damage has already been done. It is caused by unresolved repression and the ego's role in perpetuating the deviant acts he has committed.

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